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From Ningwafu to
Shiva:

Transformation of
Kirat Deity in Lichchavi-
era Nepal

Dr. Nawa Raj Subba

Contents

From Ningwafu to Shiva: Transformation of Kirat Deity in Lichchavi-era Nepal 1

Astract	1
1. introduction	2
2. Theoretical Framework	3
3. Research Methodology	3
4. Evidence of Worship of Hindus at Pashupatinath	4
5. Ningwafu and Pashupati: Scriptural Similarities	6
6. Lichchavi strategy of religious integration	6
7. Confusion about Buddhist monasteries	8
8. Living Kirat Elements in the Modern Age	10
9. Conclusion	11
References	12

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Astract

This study re-examines how "Ningwafu", the main nature deity of the Kirat community, transformed from "Pashupatinath" to the Hindu god "Shiva" during the Lichchavi period from 400 to 750 AD. This transformation of deities was not only related to religion. It depicts a better thought socio-political process where religion, culture and governance are harmonized. Through archaeological fact-finding and oral teachings (primarily mundhum) and ancient inscriptions, this study refutes the mainstream Hindu-specific account on the Foundation of Pashupatinath temple.

This shows that the religious changes made by the state attempted to overshadow the old beliefs of the indigenous Kirat community. Nevertheless, a lot of elements of Kirat religion are retained in the form of rituals, signs and oral narratives.

The discoveries of the research highlight the religious heritage of Nepal and the idea of paying more attention to the indigenous origins essential in the ancient sacred buildings. This strategy can be seen to uncover once again the old history of the excluded belonging to marginalized communities like the Kirats. It also forms part of bigger debates being held in South

Asia of the reconciliation of religions (religious coordination), cultural memory and colonial style of writing history.

Keywords: Ningwafu, Pashupati, Shiva, Kirat Dharma, Lichchavi Period, Sanskritization, Religious Syncretism

1. introduction

The Pashupatinath Temple has been frequently termed as the oldest and the most sacred Hindu place to be related to Lord Shiva. The history of this temple can be associated to the core of the early medieval world of Kathmandu valley.

However, archeological, historical and oral evidence is growing, which shows that the site was initially a sacred site of the indigenous Kirat community. There was a god named Ningwafu, who was associated with nature, animals and vitality (Chemjong, 1966; Yalung, 2003).

In the Lichchavi period, the name and method of worship of Ningwafu gradually changed. These changes are considered a process of sanskritization, where the local deity is included in the deities of Hinduism (Borgström, 1980).

This article attempts to revisit the change from Ningwafu to Pashupati. This shows that this change was not just a simple religious development, but rather a well-thought-out strategy of the state to integrate the Kirat identity into a Brahmanical Hindu framework.

Although the Pashupatinath temple has now become a Hindu site, there are still some kirat tradition symbols left. Those signs can be seen in rituals, sacred objects, and oral stories.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study rests on a theoretical paradigm that combines the postcolonial theory, the theory of syncretism in religion, and research on cultural memory. With the help of the Sanskritization theory (Srinivas, 1956), it examines the way the native Kirat deity Ningwafu was gradually re-interpreted and absorbed in Hindu pantheon into the figure of Shiva in the period of Lichchavi. The concept also suites postcolonial criticism of the historical discourses (Spivak, 1988; Smith, 1999), regarding its concern about the destruction and transformation of cultures upon state power and religious dominance.

Another methodology employed in the study is indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions (Battiste, 2000; Dei, 2000) particularly *mundhum* to recover the subaltern perspectives that are usually omitted in mainstream religious history. According to the study, the offshoots of the native are still evident in the rituals and oral tales. It involves demanding a decolonial and memory-aware approach of understanding the sacred legacy of Nepal.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative historical approach supported by three main research methods:

Inscription and textual evidence

Analysis of inscriptions from medieval history such as the Lichchavikperiod (especially King Jayadeva II's AD 713) and Gopala King Vamsawali was used to trace the linguistic and religious changes of the Pashupatinath site (Regmi, 1966; Hasrat, 1970).

Archaeological and architectural evidence:

Excavation reports and architectural surveys (e.g., Slusser, 1982; Korn, 2019) was used to explain the material culture of Pashupatinath, including the alignment of annychonic stones, ritual altars, and temple stratigraphy indicating pre-Hindu culture and art.

Ethnographic and oral sources:

Oral texts, spells and rituals of the Kirats (such as Mundhum) were used to understand the characteristics of Ningwafu. It also studied how today's Kirat communities are preserving their old religious beliefs and traditions (Limbu, 2010; Yalung, 2003).

The study was conducted on the basis of three aspects to re-evaluate the religious conversion of Pashupatinath in a historically and culturally sensitive manner.

4. Evidence of Worship of Hindus at Pashupatinath

4.1 Inscription and textual evidence

The earliest record with regard to the Pashupatinath temple was dated during 713 AD and

can be found on the stone inscription mounted in this period by King Jayadev II. According to this inscription such a site would be regarded as a holy place of Shaiva god Pashupatinath (Regmi, 1966).

Earlier, there was no evidence that Pashupati or Shiva was the main deity in the Kathmandu Valley. But the Kirat community's old oral scripture Mundhum describes a sacred place called 'Ningwafu', which deals with the protectors of forests, animals and vitality (Yalung, 2003).

Older histories such as the Gopala Raja dynasty show that the region was under Kirat rulers even before lichchavi rule came (Hasrat, 1970). This proves that the Pashupatinath area is already a religious place of the Kirats. Later, the Lichchavi rulers started linking this place with Hinduism using the story and tradition of Hinduism. Such changes helped strengthen their political power.

4.2 Archaeological returns

Excavations carried out in the Pashupatinath temple premises have found artifacts made before the Lichchavi period. These artifacts contain carved sacred stones, known as 'Yang gurung' in the Kirat tradition. Bones of animals that sacrifice cattle have also been found there.

In addition, the architecture and decoration of the open temple before it became a current Nagara-style temple also refers to the Kirat tradition (Korn, 2019; Slusser, 1982). Radiocarbon tests of some of the old relics show that they date back to around 300 BC,

indicating that the place was still being used for religious rituals even before it became a Hindu holy site.

These findings are consistent with the descriptions in Mundhum. Mundhum describes the practices of worshiping in the open, using objects of nature such as trees and stones, and sacrificing animals. These traditions were later banned or markedly altered in Brahmanical Hinduism (Limbu, 2010).

5. Ningwafu and Pashupati: Scriptural Similarities

5.1 Ideological syncretism

Both Ningwafu and Pashupatinath mean "Lord of animals", but differ in terms of expression and ritual. The Kirati deity was worshiped in aniconic manner, often symbolizing stones or trees, and being invoked on seasonal festivals such as Luchak, Sakela. In contrast, Pashupati appeared as anthropomorphic or gender. On top of that temple complexes adhering to Vedic traditions were added (Dyczkowski, 1988; Chemjong, 1966).

These similarities show that Pashupatinath was an ideological bridge, which facilitated the reinterpretation of Ningwafu within shaiva scriptures which was more acceptable to the Sanskritized elite.

6. Lichchavi strategy of religious integration

6.1 Political motivation

Specialty	Ningwafu (Kirat)	Pashupati (Hindu)
<i>Representation</i>	Stone, stance (aniconic)	Gender (anthropomorphic or symbolic)
<i>Domain</i>	Nature, Forests, Animals	All living beings (animal = animals)
<i>Ritual practice</i>	Animal Sacrifice, Seasonal Feasts	Vedic Fire Rituals, Abhishek, Shivaratri
<i>Practitioner</i>	Shaman (Phedang, Samba, Nakchong)	Brahmin priest

Many political goals were fulfilled when the Licchavi dynasty adopted Shaivism. First, it provided divine legitimacy by aligning with powerful Indian religious traditions. Second, it made it easier for them to integrate the indigenous Kirat community without violent repression . Absorbed rather than eliminated their faith (Sharma, 1983; Borgström, 1980). This approach is a feature of state-sponsored Sanskritization, where local sects were reinterpreted through Brahmanical cosmology.

6.2 Mechanisms of transformation

Inscriptional Rebranding (Epigraphic Rebranding): The inscription of Jayadeva II in 713 C.E. has redefined this site by formally naming it the area (domain) of Pashupatinath (Regmi, 1966).

Ritual coordination: Indigenous festivals such as Sakela, Charchak were reintroduced in the form of Hinduism. For example, Shivaratri combines seasonal times and symbols from old Kirat farming rituals (Limbu, 2010).

Replacement of the Old Scriptures: The traditional shaman of Kirat (Nakchong/Samba) was gradually restored by the Brahmin priests. This reduced the influence of Kirat theology on the public rituals of the temple (Borgström, 1980).

7. Confusion about Buddhist monasteries

Prior to the Lichchavi period, the worship of the Ningwafu deity of the Kirats was practiced in the Pashupatinath area, not the Buddhist monastery.

7.1. Archaeological evidence

Excavations carried out by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal between 1976-2019, have reported that no buddhist monastery remains have been found in the Pashupati area (Korn, 2019; PACT, 2020). Contrastingly, the Yangrung stones of the original temple complex (Angadha place of worship) is paraphrased to the Kirat religious focus (Slusser, 1982). They are not Buddhist sculpture

stones.

7.2. Historical documents

Gopalraj Dynasty (14 th century): According to Hasrat (1970), Kirat King Yalambar erected the original chaitya at the site of Pashupatinath to his deity Ningwafu.

Tang Dynastic Oversight in China (648 AD): According to the tradition, worship was done to the deity of animals and birds before the worship of Shivalinga was carried on in Nepal (Whelpton, 2005).

7.3. Religious Comparative Studies

According to Kirat Mundhum, the title of Ningwafu is "Yangshi Langsi" (Lord of Animals), which has the same meaning as the title "Pashupati" (Lord of Animals in Sanskrit) of Pashupatinath (Chemjong, 1966, p. 13).¹¹⁴. . It shows the continuity of Kirat and Hindu religious traditions.

7.4. Refuting the confusion about Guheshwori

Some call Guheshwori a relic of a Buddhist monastery. So:

Tibetan traveller Huensang (639 AD) calls it a "Tantric Siddhapeeth", not a Buddhist monastery (Tuladhar, 2002).

Only malla-era (12th century) texts mention Buddhist-Hindu coordination, which dates back to the original history of Pashupatinath (Michaels, 2008).

Archaeological, historical and religious sources make it clear that the original religious tradition of Pashupatinath is linked to the Ningwafu worship of kirats. The claim of Buddhist monasteries is based on medieval syncretist accounts, which are not supported by authentic evidence. Thus, the history of Pashupatinath needs to be re-studied as a Kirat religious heritage.

8. Living Kirat Elements in the Modern Age

Although the majority in Nepal are the Hindus, kirat practices are very much in existence in religious life in Nepal.

The old ritual is tied to some Kirati pilgrims who are secretly worshipers of the Yang gurun stone outside the western gate of Pashupatinath (Korn, 2019).

Festivals: GaiJatra and Chasok, Sakela, festivals of interest retain elements of pastoral, ancestral and animalistic (animist) traditions related to Kirat cosmology (Limbu, 2010).

Oral hymns: Kirati groups maintain oral spells and songs in Limbu and the Rai dialects that alluded to Ningwafu and other spiritual institutions that now lack in formal temple theology (Yalung, 2003).

These continuities demonstrate a full survival of indigenous beliefs even as the latter centuries were filled with missionary work aimed toward religious conversion.

9. Conclusion

Changing Kirat's old nature god Ningwafu from Pashupatinath to Shiva was not just a religious change; it was also a political and cultural one. The ruling class used religion to bring together disparate groups into one system during the Lichchavi period (about 400-750 AD). The monarchs devised the simpler way to deal with other castes that had diverse customs such as the Kirats, such as to incorporate indigenous deities and goddesses into Hinduism.

This was indicated by old writings, oral tradition, as well as by archeological evidence that the Pashupatinath temple used to be a sacred site of Kirat people in the past. We have the stone altars, animal bones which have been sacrificed, and the uncut stones, which they found in the temple, which are similar to the ones in the Mundhum, which is an oral scripture of the Kirats. These fragments indicate that Kirats used to honor it as a shrine in the temple site.

Even today, some elements of the Kirat tradition can be seen in the Pashupatinath area. Many Kirat pilgrims worship yang gurung, the holy stone near the west gate of the temple. Similarly, the old meanings and traditions of Kirat culture are still alive during festivals such as Gai Jatra.

This history teaches us two important things. First, Nepal's religious culture is very diverse and at a level. Behind many famous Hindu temples and traditions are old indigenous stories and practices that are mostly forgotten. Second, history doesn't always

cover everyone. Sometimes the voices of the Kirat indigenous communities disappear. But a careful study of oral history, archaeological discoveries, and old texts can help us bring their stories back.

When we look at the Pashupatinath Temple as 'Ningwafu', we can understand and respect nepal's rich and multi-cultural heritage. It also leads us to respect indigenous traditions, which, although sometimes ignored, have never been completely erased and should not be erased.

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